



PILOTS FISHER & MYERS

The last man alive? Not quite.

The Fall of a Fortress

In the nature of war across a wildly rugged, often inaccessible countryside, no shield can ever be impregnable everywhere, as the tragic fate of a Vietnamese compound called A Shau demonstrated last week.

For some 350 Montagnard mercenaries, their families and their 20 greenbereted American Special Forces advisers, A Shau in the best of times was an uneasy home. A barbed-wire and earthen-walled fortress bordered by a small airstrip, A Shau stood deep in Viet Cong-controlled territory not far from the Ho Chi Minh trail on the Laotian border. The camp existed for only one reason: to monitor traffic coming down the trail. Over the months, a kind of truce between the local Viet Cong and the Special Forces had evolved: live and let live by leaving each other alone. The truce worked until last week, when three battalions of North Vietnamese regulars arrived with orders to destroy A Shau.

First warning of trouble to come was the muffled clomp of steel biting into earth as entrenching tools signaled the fact that the enemy was digging in near the camp's wire. Then a white phosphorus mortar shell exploded inside A Shau, and the valley night erupted in recoilless cannon and machine-gun fire, the flash of shells and burning buildings. All night long the enemy poured fire into the compound. Daylight brought dive bombers to the aid of the besieged defenders, though the clouds hung so low that enemy antiaircraft guns were often firing down on allied planes from the slopes of the 1,500-ft.-high mountains above.

Next night the Communists used Bangalore torpedoes to blow a path through the wire. A Shau's defenders cut down the first Reds with Claymore mines. Still the North Vietnamese poured in. At 4:25 a.m., A Shau's radio man reported that he was the last man alive, the camp overrun. Not quite. Fighting hand-to-hand, the defenders had pulled back into the northern corner of the triangular fort.

Next morning, the weather again helped the enemy. With a mere 200-ft. ceiling, the choppers and planes had to come in right on the Communist guns—and six were shot down. One skidded safely onto the airstrip in a gear-up landing, and its pilot, Major Stafford ("Jump") Myers, 46, jumped out and scrambled into a trench. Minutes later, his fellow pilot, Major Bernard Fisher, had braved the hail of fire to land his Skyraider on the same short strip. "Nobody's ever seen an old man like me run so fast in his life," Jump explained later. He made it safely to Fisher's plane, thanks to two other Skyraiders that sprayed bullets all around him—in one case dropping a North Vietnamese only 20 feet away from the sprinting Myers.

For all the bravery of its defenders, A Shau was a lost fortress, and reluctantly the allies decided to "close the camp." In two days, rescue helicopters plucked 204 survivors, twelve of them American, from the ruins of A Shau. The rest of A Shau's defenders were dead or missing, but the North Vietnamese had paid dearly for their victory in an estimated 500 dead of their own.

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